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THE MYTH OF GOLD LAKE.

BY J. M. GUINN.

(Read before the Pioneers.)

The history of the early California "gold rushes" has never been written. In the flush days of California gold mining, life was too strenuous to waste time in writing the current history of events that seemed unimportant then. If the rumor that started the rush proved a fake, the disgusted miners pocketed their disappointment and kept silent. If it resulted in the discovery of rich diggings, it was their policy to conceal the fact lest too many came to share their good fortune.

The gold rush—that is, a rush to unknown and unexplored regions on a rumor that rich deposits of the precious metals abounded there—did not originate with the early California miners. It is as old as civilization. Ulysses and his Argonauts were off on a gold rush when they set out to find the golden fleece of Phryxus' ram. The myth of Quivira and its king, Tartarax, who adored a golden cross, sent Coronado and his four hundred gold hunters on a weary tramp across deserts, mountains and plains.

The fabled island of California, peopled with Amazons whose arms and the trappings of the wild beasts they rode were of pure gold, lured Cortes and his followers into a gold rush that ended like many a one since has—in death and disaster. Myth and mystery have always been potent factors in inciting a gold rush. Credulity is one of the strongest motive powers in moving humanity, whether it be exerted in promoting a gold rush or successfully launching a get-rich-quick scheme.

One of the first of the famous California gold rushes was the quest for Gold Lake. The myth of a Lake of Gold is almost as old as our knowledge of America. Away back in the days of Cortes and Pizarro there was a wide-spread legend of El Dorado and a Lake of Gold. On the table lands of New Granada, in South America, lived a people known as Chibchas. They were more advanced in civilization than the Incas of Peru. They possessed populous cities, paved roads and pursued varied industries. They made golden ornaments and images, and used gold for a circulating medium in trade. Among

these people existed a strange custom. Once a year the ruler or cacique was anointed with an adhesive ointment and gold dust thickly scattered over his nude body until he literally became a gilded man. Then he was rowed on a raft to the middle of Lake Gautivita, into the waters of which he plunged until freed from his glittering robe. In the center of the lake was supposed to dwell an enormous serpent. The glittering dust was a propitiatory offering to appease the avarice of the demon who dwelt far down in the depths of the lake.

The legend of El Dorado, which is a Spanish phrase, literally meaning "The Gilded," and contracted from "el hombre dorado," spread far and wide throughout Spanish America, and even reached Europe. It inflamed the avarice of the Spaniards and expedition after expedition was fitted out to search for the land of El Dorado and its Lake of Gold. Immense sums were spent in the search, and countless lives sacrificed. Even the English became imbued with enthusiasm and joined in the quest. Sir Walter Raleigh made four unsuccessful attempts to enter the valley of the Orinoco, where he supposed the kingdom of the Gilded Man was located. At length Gonzalo Ximinez de Quesada, with a force of seven hundred men, marching up the valley of Rio Magdalena, penetrated the land of El Dorado and conquered its inhabitants. Of the seven hundred men with whom he began his march, only 180 were alive when the conquest was completed, and the brave Chibchas were almost annihilated. To foil the Spaniards they sank their golden images and ornaments in the waters of the sacred lake.

During the reign of Philip II an attempt was made to drain the Golden Lake Gautivita, but the undertaking was not successful. A few golden images and ornaments were his reward for an immense outlay. The glittering dust washed from the gilded bodies of numberless caciques in long ages past lay deep down in the lair of the demon of the lake. Such is the legend of El Dorado. How many who use the phrase know its origin?

The Indians dwelling around Coloma at the time of Marshall's discovery had a similar legend of a Lake of Gold inhabited by an aquatic monster. Far up among the fastnesses of the Sierra Nevadas, according to this myth, was a lake whose sides were lined with gold, and the cliffs that lifted above it glittered in the sunlight, but in its waters dwelt a horrible monster who devoured all that came near his abode. No Indian

ever bathed in the waters of Gold Lake. Some romancing miner, catching fragments of the Indian myth and conveniently leaving out the demon of the lake, told as a fact the story of the discovery by the Indians of a Lake of Gold. The story passed from one to another and grew in size and more elaborate in details as it traveled. Then the story of the discovery got into the papers, and with that reverence for whatever appears in print that possesses us, people said the story must be true; the papers say so; and then the rush was on. The center of the excitement was at Marysville, but it spread all over the northern mines. I quote from an editorial in the Placer Times of June 17, 1850. Under the heading, "Gold Lake," the editor said: "We were inclined to give only an average degree of credit to stories that have reached us during the past few days of the unprecedented richness which that locality (Gold Lake) has developed. A few moments passed in Marysville last Saturday convinced us that there is much more reality in this last Eureka report than usually attaches to such. In a year's experience of local excitement from the same cause we have seen none equal to that which prevails in that town.

"The specimens brought into Marysville are of a value from \$1500 down. Ten ounces is reported as no unusual yield to the panfull, and the first party of 60, which started out under the guidance of one who had returned successful, were assured that they would not get less than \$500 each per day. We were told that 200 had left town with a full supply of provisions and 400 mules. Mules and horses have doubled in value and 400 were considered no more than enough for a start.

"The distance to Gold Lake was first reported 200 miles. It lies at a very considerable elevation among the mountains that divide the waters of the south fork of Feather river from the north branch of the Yuba. The direction from Marysville is a little north of east."

In the Placer Times of the 18th the editor, under the head line of "Further From the Infected District," says: "On the arrival of the Lawrence (steamboat) yesterday from Marysville, we received more news of the Gold Lake excitement. It promises to spare no one. It is reported that up to last Thursday 2000 persons had taken up their journey. Many who were working good claims deserted them for the new discovery. Mules and horses were almost impossible to obtain. Although the truth of the report rests on the authority of but two or three who have returned from Gold Lake, yet few are found who

doubt the marvelous revelations. The first man who came into Marysville took out a party of forty, as guide, on condition they paid him \$100 each if his story was verified, even offering his life as a forfeit for any deception. A second guide has left with a much larger party, who are to give him \$200 each, and the same forfeit—his life—if there is any deception.

"The spot is described as very difficult of access, and it is feared many will lose their way. A party of Kanakas are reported to have wintered at Gold Lake, subsisting chiefly on the flesh of their animals. They are said to have taken out \$75,000 the first week.

"When a conviction takes such complete possession of a whole community, who are fully conversant of all the exaggerations that have had their day, it is scarcely prudent to utter a qualified dissent from that which is universally unquestioned and believed."

The Sacramento Daily Transcript of June 19th says: "Places of business in Marysville are closed. The diggings at Gold Lake are probably the richest ever discovered. A story is current that a man at Gold Lake saw a large piece floating on the lake which he succeeded in getting ashore. So clear are the waters that another man saw a rock of gold on the bottom. After many efforts he succeeded in lassoing it. Three days afterward he was seen standing holding on to his rope and vainly trying to land his prize."

The Placer Times of July 1st gives the denouement of the rush: "The Gold Lake excitement, so much talked of and acted upon of late, has almost subsided. A crazy man comes in for a share of the responsibility. Another report is that they have found one of the pretended discoverers and are about lynching him at Marysville. Indeed, we are told that a demonstration against that town is feared by many. People who have returned after traveling some 150 to 200 miles say that they left vast numbers of parties roaming between the sources of the Yuba and Feather rivers."

After all the definiteness of its location and the minuteness of details in regard to it; the Kanakas living on the flesh of their steeds and piling up \$75,000 a week on its shores; the man who rescued float gold from its bosom, and the other man who lassoed the massive nugget far down in its crystalline waters; the guides who had been there and who placed their lives as a forfeit against falsehood—after all these and more, Gold Lake was a phantom, a fake, a figment of an Indian myth.

It is a good illustration of the marvelous capacity that people have for believing what they wish and hope may be true.

We laugh at the phantom chasing of early days, the wild rush for Gold Lake, the mad scramble to Gold Bluffs, the search for the Lost Cabin, the weary quest for the Padre's mine and the pursuit of other *ignes fatui* that have deluded honest miners and sent them chasing over mountains and across deserts after illusions; and yet it is not strange that such things occurred. The interior of California in the days of '49 was a *terra incognita*—an unknown land.

There was a common belief among the early miners that the gold in the streams came from mother lodes far up in the mountains. For ages the attrition of the elements had disintegrated these quartz lodes and the floods had floated down the streams gold dust and nuggets. Could the mother lode or lead be found, the fortunate finder would chip off a few tons of gold-bearing quartz, pulverize it, extract the gold, and return to the States to the girl he had left behind him—a multi-millionaire.